

At Arms Length

The Chances For SALT II May Improve With Time

By RICHARD BURT

WASHINGTON — Since early last year, they've been saying "it couldn't be done" as President Carter sent one difficult foreign policy measure after another to Congress. Now, with the new strategic arms limitation treaty, he is tackling the most difficult of them all.

Despite the skeptics, the President crossed such minefields as the Panama Canal treaties, sending jet fighters to Saudi Arabia and Egypt; lifting the embargo on arms to Turkey, cutting formal ties to Taiwan. But with SALT II, the stakes are higher and doubts about the President's ability to prevail are deeper. Once again, the battleground is the Senate. The issue, simply stated, is whether the controversial new treaty will enhance or jeopardize American security.

The Administration faces the seemingly insurmountable task of convincing 67 or more senators that, as Mr. Carter said last week, "a SALT treaty will lessen the danger of nuclear destruction, while safeguarding our military security in a more stable, predictable and peaceful world."

White House aides acknowledge that when details of the accord became known last year, critics were able to seize the initiative. One leading military expert in the Senate, Henry M. Jackson, Democrat of Washington, questioned whether it would go far enough in limiting Soviet forces. John Glenn, Democrat of Ohio, said he supported the treaty's aims but doubted whether it could be protected against Soviet cheating. Traditional arms control supporters such as Frank Church, Democrat of Idaho, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, kept silent.

Well-financed antitreaty groups such as the Committee on the Present Danger and the Coalition for Peace through

Strength began campaigning, and influential kibitzers, including former Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger, quietly let it be known that they were skeptical.

Last week's announcement did not seem to radically alter this situation. Although Senator Church in a speech on Thursday moved closer to voicing open support for the accord, another important senator, Majority Leader Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia, was careful not to commit himself. Even the most optimistic White House vote-counters conceded that, at present, probably only 40 senators supported the treaty.

But there were signs that the momentum may be shifting. The long delay in wrapping up the accord may have helped Mr. Carter in unexpected ways, White House aides suggested. Antitreaty forces may be in danger of running out of steam. More important, had the treaty been completed last year, the Administration would not have been geared up to promote it.

That clearly is no longer the case. A task force, headed by Presidential assistant Hamilton Jordan, is spearheading the ratification campaign with the help of White House media expert Gerald Rafshoon and political operative Anne Wexler. The group has mapped out a comprehensive strategy. Thousands of community leaders, businessmen and union chiefs are to be invited to special seminars on the treaty. High foreign policy officials, led by Secretary of Defense Harold Brown and Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance, have been asked to deliver personal briefings to former President Ford, Mr. Kissinger, former Secretary of State Dean Rusk and other influential citizens.

The Administration's effectiveness is likely to depend in large part on how it makes its case. Officials believe it would be a critical error to repeat arguments used by the Nixon Administration in 1972 to gain passage for the first Soviet-American strategic accords. Mr. Nixon and Mr. Kissinger argued that SALT I would substantially halt the arms race and would lead to Soviet restraint in other spheres.

Sadder but wiser senior officials now are taking a much more modest approach. Last week, Secretary Brown told reporters that the new accord would not resolve the main military problems created by the recent Soviet buildup; in an apparent bid to woo Senate hardliners, he indicated that under the treaty, the United States would still move ahead with several new strategic systems, possibly including the controversial MX mobile intercontinental missile.

Officials know that if the Administration gave the go-ahead for the MX and other new weapons, it would risk the wrath of committed arms-controllers. Already, liberal senators — George McGovern, Democrat of South Dakota, Mark Hatfield, Republican of Oregon, and William Proxmire, Democrat of Wisconsin — have warned that they might vote against the treaty if Mr. Carter approved the MX. Despite this warning, most Administration officials suggested that in the end, liberal senators will support the treaty and thus it is the conservatives who must be courted.

Moderates in the Senate will also find it difficult to come out against the treaty, officials believe, particularly, if the debate runs into the opening rounds of the 1980 Presidential campaign. White House political advisers would like to depict Mr. Carter as a "peace candidate" in 1980. Recognizing difficulties for Republicans, Senator Robert Dole of Kansas warned last week that "anyone who tries to ride all-out opposition to the SALT treaty into the White House will have the plank pulled out from under him."

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Mr. Dole's statement — a pleasant surprise for the Administration — a key theme, that although the new treaty would not guarantee Soviet-American stability, rejection would plunge the two powers into a new era of expanded arms competition and political rivalry. "It's a tough argument to counter," one anti-treaty senator conceded. "By playing up the negative consequences of rejecting the agreement, they are making all us opponents look like warmongers."

Yet outright rejection is not the critics' only option. As opposition becomes more politically difficult, many senators are likely to try to amend the treaty. Congressional aides say widespread support is probable for amendments to strengthen verification of the accord. Some proposals could aim at changing basic provisions, for instance, asking Moscow to give up its exclusive right under the treaty to deploy 300 super-large "heavy" missiles.

At this stage, senior officials are taking the line that important changes would not be acceptable to Moscow and thus would scuttle the whole agreement. During last year's grueling Panama Canal debate, Mr. Carter was willing to renegotiate key parts of the accords with Panama's Gen. Omar Torrijos in order to finally gain Senate passage. But as White House aides are fond of saying, Mr. Brezhnev is not General Torrijos.

White House handling of the Panama treaties could come back to haunt the Administration. In last year's debate, President Carter's flexibility on the issue of amendments set a precedent for Senate involvement in international negotiations. If he were faced with the choice of a defeat in the Senate or of going back to Moscow on a few points, some officials believe that he would choose the latter.